

Guidelines for peer observation of teaching

Evaluation of teaching effectiveness is an important element of all faculty performance reviews. University guidelines recommend multiple modes of assessment for teaching, including the review of teaching materials, course feedback from students, and peer observation of teaching. This memo communicates guidelines and recommends best practices for peer observations that are conducted for the purposes of promotion, tenure, reappointment, annual or mid-contract review.¹

Effective teaching involves a number of components, such as content expertise, teaching approaches, and course/assignment design. Peer observation of teaching is a powerful complementary approach to student evaluations of teaching, because faculty offer the best source of information on factors such as content expertise and alignment of course objectives with the curriculum.

1. If a department is using peer observation for review of teaching, the frequency of observations should be, at minimum:

- Assistant Professors and lecturers should be observed at least once every year, ideally to coincide with and be incorporated into their annual review
- Associate Professors should be observed at least twice before submitting for promotion to full
- Senior Lecturers and Distinguished Senior Lecturers should be observed at least twice in a six-year cycle

It's recommended that tenured professors conduct the observations of tenure-track or already tenured faculty, that tenured professors and/or Distinguished Senior Lecturers conduct observations of Senior Lecturers and Distinguished Senior Lecturers, and that Senior Lecturers and/or Distinguished Senior Lecturers conduct observations of Lecturers. If resources allow, it is recommended that at least two faculty members – two faculty in the same department or one within the department and one without – have an opportunity to observe the candidate over the time period under review.

2. An effective peer observation involves three interactions:

- an initial meeting with the instructor for the observer(s) to learn more about the instructor's goals and questions, framed by the syllabus
 - a. The observer should ask the instructor to indicate the best ways to see the instructor's teaching (Canvas, website, in person or online)
 - b. For both in-person and online instruction observations, the instructor should decide the timing of the visit and what materials will be shared
- an unobtrusive classroom visit at a time mutually agreed upon at the initial meeting

¹ Faculty may request a confidential observation by emailing Sheridan_center@brown.edu. This observation would be conducted for formative purposes only and would only be included in a TPAC dossier if both the candidate and the Sheridan Center staff agree to this.

- a. For online teaching, the instructor may add the observer to her/his Canvas site—there is a special designation in Canvas for an observer
 - b. The instructor should introduce the observer, whether in-person or online. For example, “This is Professor Carberry. I’ve asked her to join the class today to give me some feedback on my teaching.”
- a final discussion where the instructor has a chance to discuss, review, and learn from the observer’s written report, with focus on both strengths and suggestions. It might be helpful to ask the instructor about the course structure and why he or she took that approach. For online courses in particular, keep in mind that there are many ways to organize and structure such a course.

If, after the final meeting, there are significant differences of interpretation, the observee should be offered the opportunity to append a written response.

3. An effective peer observation report involves the sharing of a written report. Typically, this report is largely descriptive (e.g., what behaviors were observed during the class visit), to offer evidence to anchor any evaluative statements about the quality of instruction. Prior to implementation of a peer observation system, departments should engage in discussion about key criteria that should be used as a lens for the observation and included in a report. Both narrative and structured (e.g., Classroom Observation Protocol for Undergraduate STEM, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3846513/>) approaches can be effective, as long as the department has endorsed the specific process to be used. Common elements include context (e.g., date, number of students, course) as well as categories such as clarity, classroom climate/environment, content knowledge, level of challenge, organization, pace, and engagement. The Sheridan Center is a resource for offering more examples used at peer universities.

References

- Arreola, R.A. (2007). *Developing a comprehensive faculty evaluation system, 3rd ed.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Chism, N.V.N. (2007). *Peer review of teaching: A sourcebook, 2nd ed.* Bolton, MA: Anker.
- Murray, H.G. (2007) Low-inference teaching behaviors and college teaching effectiveness: Recent developments and controversies. In R.P. Perry and J.C. Smart, Eds. *The scholarship of teaching and learning in higher education: An evidence-based perspective* (pp. 145-200). New York: Springer.
- Torres, A.C., Lopes, A., Valente, J.M.S., & Mouraz, A. (2017). What catches the eye in class observation? Observers’ perspectives in a multidisciplinary peer observation of teaching program. *Teaching in Higher Education, 22*(7): 822-838.